Crew-Resource Management

Situational Awareness

Assertiveness

Decision-Making

Leadership

Communication

Adaptability/Flexibility

Mission Analysis

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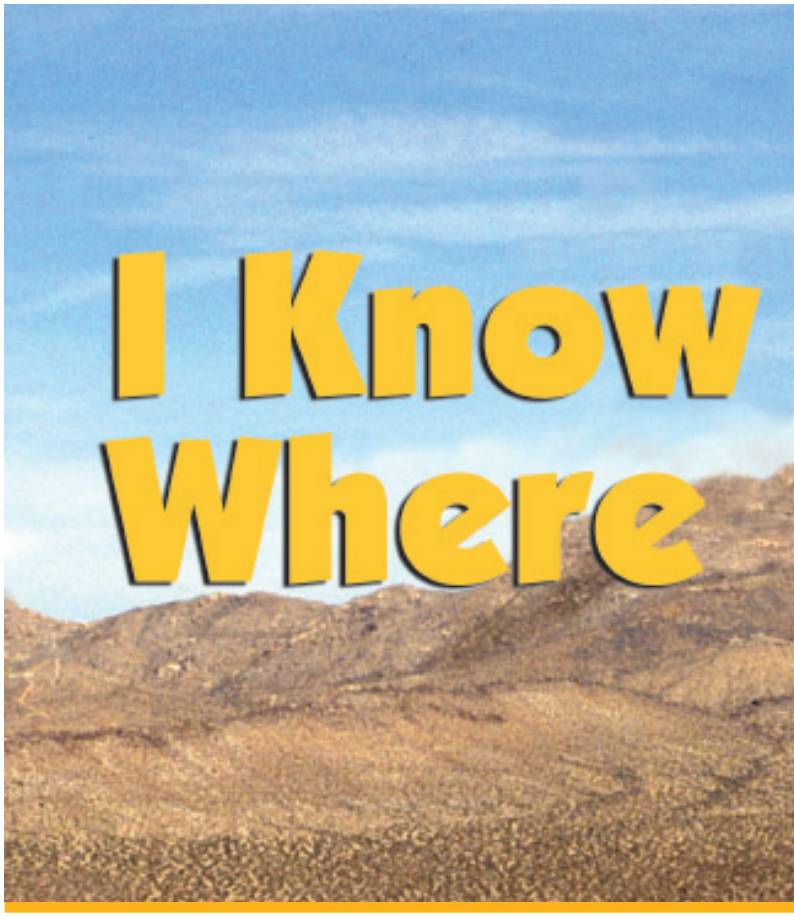

By LCdr. Ken Durbin

I was a happy 2P. Our crew members were the new guys in the northern Red Sea, and we were tasked to inspect ships suspected of violating the UN sanctions against Iraq. The ops were a no-brainer, and we quickly settled into our groundhog routine. We were standing alert when called to combat and given a new mission.

A chief on board a Navy ship had amputated his finger on a coffin locker. The ship's corpsman recommended a transfer to a hospital in western Saudi Arabia. We were tasked with the job.

I jumped into the charts and pubs to plan the flight. We needed to clear an 8,000-foot mountain range, but, other than that, this flight had fun-meter possibilities. We manned our SH-60B and departed.

We were not on deck long when the corpsman, our crewman and our nine-digit chief arrived just outside the rotor arc. The chief's arm was bent and wrapped from armpit to wrist to elevate the injured nub. He held up an IV bag in

Photo composite

his good hand. A plastic bag full of ice and his finger were pinned to his chest. He was under the influence of feel-good medicine, and, as a result, his tongue looked like that of a panting puppy. I cringed and held the stick a little tighter as he entered the rotor arc. He was at least 6-feet tall and hardly stooped on entry. Once the crewman reported he was strapped in, we lifted for our two-hour flight to the hospital.

The weather was great, and I learned that western Saudi Arabia resembles Arizona, complete with mesas and canyons.

We picked out the hospital against the desert landscape on our arrival. I reported the landing checklist complete to the HAC. I then evaluated the landing site and told the HAC what I had seen as we circled the hospital. Located above the third floor was a large, clearly marked helicopter-landing pad. Three sides were unobstructed. Adjacent to the fourth side were elevated hospital buildings. Off to the side of the pad and next to the building, three people in white coats were waiting with a gurney.

I told him I would call rollout for lineup, but the HAC stopped his turn 90 degrees early. He said he had the landing spot in site and was on final. We were at 450 feet. I looked out and down to identify what he was lined up on. I saw a square parking lot with a gate and a guard shack on one end. The perimeter of the parking lot was lined with about 16 ambulances. Two dumpsters were located in one corner. In the center of the parking lot, I barely could make out a large H within a circle. Both had been painted over with black paint to match the asphalt.

I explained that according to the turnover packet we had received from the previous detachment, he was lined up on the old helo spot. It no longer was in use, but he continued his approach. I looked over at the 9 o'clock position and watched the puzzled look on the faces of the hospital personnel, waiting at the elevated spot. I

scrambled for the nav bag and pulled a copy of the lessons-learned message from another 60B crew that had made this trip. I read verbatim the paragraph describing the new elevated helo-landing pad, but the HAC continued. In an authoritative voice, I recommended he wave off this approach, circle again, pass me the controls, and read the message himself. He told me that we were landing at the pad in front of us. Nothing was left for me to do but sit on my hands—hey, he's the HAC.

I called descent rates, ground speed, and anything else I thought he might be interested in knowing. As we transitioned to a hover, I noticed the parking lot seemed smaller than I expected. The ambulances seemed closer. The two dumpsters let loose some of their holdings, creating a tornado of FOD in front of us. Plastic bags swirled around us. We sandblasted the parked cars and shook the guard shack. Our crewman called our tail clear, and we landed.

I was way past unhappy. The HAC, on the other hand, was pleased with himself and his landing. After we shut down, he disembarked, told me to stay with the aircraft, and left with the crewman to escort the nine-digit chief to medical assistance. I sat there conducting a one-on-one debrief with myself. What had I missed? I reread the message and found nothing that would lead me to believe we had landed at the correct spot.

My post-mission evaluation was cut short by arrival of the guard. He motioned to the gate as it opened. Suddenly, a large garbage truck swung into the parking lot. I barely got unstrapped, turned off the rotor brake, and turned the head in time to prevent the truck from pranging the tip cap on a main-rotor blade. It was so close that, as the truck backed out, I had to rotate the head in the opposite direction. As I was dancing with the garbage truck, moving the head back and forth, our crewman returned and couldn't restrain himself from laughing out loud. The truck eventually left.

Next, the guard produced a camera and asked for a photo of himself and our crewman in front of the aircraft. As I framed them, I noticed a small, metal, Sears temporary-storage shed in the background—the kind your dad used to store his John Deere riding mower. The roof was detached from the shed on all four sides. I nonchalantly moved my subjects to change the background. Who can say how that shed became damaged? Then the crewman and I conducted a FOD walk-around.

The HAC returned, smiling and handing out miniature soda cans. We started the aircraft, sandblasted the cars, rocked the guard shack, and kicked more biomedical waste out of the dumpsters. We lifted and departed for the ship.

I look back on that incident and try to apply what I since have learned about crew-resource management. I failed many times that day. First, I failed the preflight planning. We should have briefed, and our landing site should have been crystal clear to all. We had the info before the flight and had no reason to debate on final.

Second, I failed to communicate. I was sure the landing site was elevated, and we were lined up for the wrong one. I failed to articulate my position. Being right is of little use if you fail to convince others that you are right. You must appear confident.

Finally, I was not assertive. I should have assumed control of the aircraft, demanded that the HAC read the message, and circled the hospital once more. Instead, I shut up and sat still once the HAC made his choice known.

We never heard anything about the chief or his finger. I don't know if we affected the successful reuniting of the chief with his digit. I don't want to know. We never heard anything about the roof on the tin shed, either. We took a perfectly simple mission and executed it as wrongly as we possibly could.

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